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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CHENNAI 000168

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [IN](#)
SUBJECT: KARNATAKA'S ELECTIONS: CONGRESS SHOULD WIN, BUT
THAT DOESN'T MEAN IT WILL

REF: A. CHENNAI 167
[1](#)B. CHENNAI 119

Classified By: Consul General David T. Hopper for reasons 1.4 b and d

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: All Indian political eyes are on the South Indian state of Karnataka as it heads toward legislative assembly elections that begin on May 10 (ref A). A key pre-election poll published by one of South India's leading dailies shows that the Congress Party looks set to win a significant plurality of the vote but fall short of a majority. Other polls -- all of unknown quality -- show a tighter contest, but generally place Congress on top. The election looks to be largely a two-way contest between the Congress Party and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with the Janata Dal (Secular) Party (JDS) reduced to a relatively minor role.

[1](#)2. (C) Congress should benefit from the electorate's negative views of the previous BJP-JDS coalition and from the BJP's inability to attract Muslim or Christian voters, who may comprise some 15 percent of the state's electorate. This raises expectations for Congress, however, and if it fails to win, the loss will be all the more painful. National BJP leader L.K. Advani is optimistic about his party's prospects but feels that getting an absolutely majority may be difficult. Regardless who comes out on top, however, it will be difficult to win a majority, forcing the main parties to find a coalition partner. This might result in yet another weak and divided government for a state in desperate need of competent, forward-thinking governance. End Comment.

The poll that's got everybody talking

[1](#)3. (U) The Deccan Herald, one of South India's leading dailies, published on April 30 the results of a poll it conducted in conjunction with the CNN-IBN television network and the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), a Delhi-based social science research center. All of the people we spoke with during our April 30 - May 2 visit to southern Karnataka were well aware of the survey, which is likely to be the most reputable done in the state. The poll's headline-grabber was its conclusion that the Congress Party was set to receive 39 percent of the vote, well ahead of the BJP's 28 percent, with 20 percent of the respondents opting for the JDS. Only two percent of the respondents selected the Bhujan Sumaj Party (BSP). More than a third of respondents, mainly those who selected either the BJP or JDS, said that they may change their minds before polling day. (The survey asked 5124 voters from across the state to use a dummy ballot to indicate their voting preferences.)

14. (U) The survey also indicates that Congress is the only party that will be competitive in all of Karnataka's six regions (Bangalore, Southern Karnataka, Coastal Karnataka, Mumbai Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, and Central Karnataka). Only in Central Karnataka and Bangalore will there be a real three-way race, suggests the poll. The Congress Party will face competition from only the BJP in Coastal and Mumbai Karnataka, while its only challenger in Southern and Hyderabad Karnataka will be the JDS.

15. (U) The survey further suggests that the deciding factor in favor of the Congress Party seems to be the movement of the "lower social bloc" (backward castes, Dalits, Adivasis (scheduled tribes), and Muslims) decidedly in favor of Congress; a clear majority of this group -- 54 percent -- favored Congress, with the BJP and JDS garnering only 18 percent each. The poll also showed that the "upper social bloc" (upper castes, land-owning castes, and Karnataka's dominant Vokkaliga and Lingayat castes) is evenly split among the three main parties.

Why Congress?

16. (SBU) Our interlocutors in Karnataka, mainly senior journalists, academics, and retired senior bureaucrats, expressed surprise at the scale of the Congress Party's lead suggested by the Deccan Herald's survey, but agreed that it generally confirmed their expectation that the race is Congress's to lose. They told us that the electorate remembers the former coalition partners (BJP and JDS) more

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for their squabbling than for their accomplishments in office, thus giving the Congress an anti-incumbency boost.

17. (SBU) The South India editor of The Economic Times told us that he detected a general consensus in the electorate that only the Congress Party might be able to get a majority and thus deliver a stable government. He admitted that he had not yet decided for whom he would vote, and that he did not really care who won, as he could not discern any real difference between the policies of Congress or the BJP (this point, too, was repeated by many of our interlocutors). Important for him, he said, was that one of the parties win a majority so that it could establish a stable government. He also said that many others in the electorate probably feel the same, so the perception that one of the parties might be able to get a majority might lead to increased support as voters sought to back a solid winner.

Why not the BJP?

18. (SBU) We heard repeatedly that the BJP is failing generally to create much excitement in Karnataka. Several of the journalists we spoke with said that nearly all of the BJP's candidates are from the Lingayat caste (reftel), and that the BJP is increasingly becoming seen in the state as the party of elites and Lingayats. The editor of the Bangalore edition of the Times of India said that one of the BJP's national stars, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, held a rally in the home district of the Karnataka BJP's president that attracted a crowd of only 5000 supporters -- an abysmally low turnout.

19. (C) In a May 1 meeting with the Embassy's Acting Political Section Chief, former Deputy Prime Minister and current Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani said his party cadres are very optimistic that the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) will fare well in the upcoming Karnataka assembly elections. He was personally skeptical, however, about whether the party would be able to win the absolute majority it needs to form the government. He unequivocally ruled out a coalition with the JDS, saying it is impossible for the BJP to have any alliance with Deve Gowda's party given its recent history of

promises broken and betrayals. (State-level BJP officials in Karnataka have said publicly and in private to us that the BJP will not form a coalition with any party, emphasizing that it will win a majority or sit in opposition. This decision, however, will ultimately come from the party's national leadership.)

¶10. (C) Advani appeared resigned to the BJP sitting in the opposition in Karnataka but held out some small measure of hope that what his cadres are telling him is not merely wishful thinking. Reflecting the intense attention the BJP is giving to this election, Advani said that he will be completely preoccupied with the Karnataka elections through May, including a week or so after election results are announced on May 25 for the dust to settle and a new government to be formed.

¶11. (U) A top state BJP official told reporters on May 5 that the party conducted an "internal survey" indicating that the BJP would claim 119 to 129 of the 224 seats available, with Congress winning only 60. When pressed to identify the agency that had conducted poll, the official refused to name it, noting only that it was "a reputed agency." (Comment: Some Indians tend to use the word "reputed" when an American would say "reputable;" we presume this is one of those occasions. End comment.)

The known unknown: the BSP

¶12. (SBU) None of our interlocutors on this trip felt confident predicting how the BSP would fare in the election, but all regarded its chances as the great mystery of the campaign. A social science professor from the prestigious Indian Institute of Science (IIS) in Bangalore told us that the Deccan Herald's poll "almost certainly" understates support for the BSP, which he said is fielding very strong candidates in several constituencies.

¶13. (SBU) P.G. Sindhia, the BSP's national General Secretary, is from Karnataka and is a former member of the JDS. He told

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us more than a month ago (ref B) that he does not expect to get more than 15 seats in this election, but emphasized that the increase in the number of constituencies reserved for backward castes, Dalits, and Adivasis (ref A) bodes well for his party's future in the state.

Beware the opinion polls

¶14. (SBU) Several of our interlocutors told us that the size of the Deccan Herald's survey sample (5124 respondents) was statistically valid -- indeed, significantly larger than such polls in other countries -- but probably too small to accurately reflect opinion in Karnataka. The IIS professor said that the survey's methodology might be accurate if the state selected its legislative assembly members by statewide proportional representation. The fact that it has a first-past-the-post electoral system in each constituency, however, means that an accurate survey would need to get a statistically valid sample in each of the constituencies to get an accurate state-wide assessment.

¶15. (SBU) The professor emphasized that in large swathes of the state, the residents of each village will gather and decide en masse for which candidate they will vote -- and then all of the residents of that village will vote for the same candidate. These villagers tend to make their voting decision based on their assessment of which candidate will win their constituency, and they will support that candidate. They believe, he said, that this increases their village's importance to the winning candidate, and will therefore result in increased governmental largesse when "their" candidate wins.

The race to watch

¶16. (U) Perhaps the most interesting constituency to watch will be the town of Shikaripura, which lies in the central Karnataka district of Shimoga, some 330 km west-northwest of Bangalore. Nine candidates are officially vying for the seat, but two stand out. One is the BJP's candidate for Chief Minister(CM), B.S. Yediyurappa, who briefly held the state's top job in November 2007, becoming the first CM from his party to hold the top position in a South Indian state. (The BJP is the only party that has declared an official CM candidate.)

¶17. (SBU) The other main candidate in the race is S. Bangarappa, a former CM himself, who belongs to the Samajwadi Party (SP). Bangarappa is a member of the Idiga caste, one of the "backward castes" that dominates the Shimoga district (Yediyurappa is a Lingayat). Sensing an opportunity to embarrass the BJP, both the JDS and Congress Party have essentially pulled their candidates in the constituency out of the race (technically, the Congress candidate waited too long, so his name is still on the ballot, but he has stopped campaigning.) A former editor of the Deccan Herald (whose family still owns the paper) told us that Bangarappa is an extremely strong candidate, and that it would be a major blow to the collective ego of the BJP if the party's CM candidate failed to win his seat.

Comment

¶18. (SBU) Congress ought to be the clear favorite in this race, but neither the Deccan Herald poll nor the mess generated by the previous coalition should lead anyone to conclude that the party has an easy route to victory. Many of the Muslims and Christians who supported the JDS last time may indeed look for another party to support, but there is no guarantee that they will opt for Congress this time. Nobody is yet sure how much support the BSP will attract in the state, but it may prove attractive to the minority and lower-caste voters that the Congress Party is hoping to lure to its side. This could prove fatal to Congress's chances. Given the party's inflated expectations, if it manages to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, such a blow would be painful indeed.

¶19. (SBU) If the Congress Party does not fare as well as expected, it will be particularly dispiriting for the party faithful, coming as it will at a time when the party is weak

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after devastating defeats in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, the political difficulties caused by rising inflation, and the continual bullying by its communist colleagues. The party will become even more risk-averse and cautious going forward. It will begin to behave and be treated as a lame duck a year ahead of the scheduled national elections.

¶20. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.
HOPPER